

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be pleasing in your sight, LORD, our Rock and our Redeemer. (Psalm 19:14)

Do you ever feel like you are a voice crying out in the wilderness?

Do you ever feel like *everything* you shout to the world only gets blown back in your face by the wind?

If you do feel like this, then take heart, stand strong, and continue crying out in the wilderness, because you *don't* stand alone. You are just one of many who have taken their stand and cried out words of judgment *and* words of comfort to the people and times they lived in.

This morning's readings are from, or refer to, three men who were empowered by God to proclaim a message to the people of their times: Isaiah, John the Baptist, and Peter.

What can we learn from their messages and how can we take what we learn and apply it to our collective cries in the wilderness of the world we live in?

The voices of Isaiah, John the Baptist, and Peter all have messages for two groups of people, firstly the people of God and then those, who due to the hardness of their hearts and unwillingness to be moved by God's Spirit, find themselves not knowing the mercy and grace that their Heavenly Father wants to bestow on all people.

Isaiah began his message with a word for the people of God:

"Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem..."

The people of Isaiah's time, *partly* due to a lack of righteous leadership, were being led away from worshipping the LORD to worshipping so-called other 'gods' the other nations around them worshipped. Are the people of our time any different?

Isaiah was called by the LORD to bring a message of warning to the kings and people of Judah that they were travelling on a road to destruction unless they heeded the warnings the LORD was giving them through the mouth of His prophet Isaiah.

As so often happens, his voice of warning was drowned out or ignored by those who had the major responsibility to heed those warnings i.e., the kings, and so the people of Judah were eventually led into captivity by the Babylonians.

The context of our reading this morning from Isaiah 40 is that Isaiah prophesied to King Hezekiah that a time was coming when some of his descendants, along with all the people of Judah, would be taken into captivity in Babylon (Isaiah 39:5 – 7).

Into this air of expectation God told Isaiah to speak tenderly and reassure God's people that they would be brought back to where they belonged, not just geographically, but far more importantly, spiritually as the chosen people of God.

Isaiah declared that for God's people, His chosen Old Testament bride, a time would come when,

"her hard service has been completed, that her sin has been paid for"

and that,

"she has received from the LORD's hand double for all her sins."

These words would have encouraged the people, while at the same time reminding them that the prophesied years of their captivity would be caused by their own doing. It would be their sins that saw them taken into captivity, but the hardships and heartaches inflicted upon them by the judging hand of God, would also be doubly recompensed by His gracious and merciful hand.

After making his people aware of how the holy and righteous justice of God would bring them into captivity and yet still bestow upon them His constant grace and mercy, Isaiah stood as a herald and declared,

"A voice of one calling: In the desert prepare the way for the LORD; ...."

Isaiah was emboldened to herald the need for all people to prepare their own hearts, minds, and spirits to heed the words of God, lest we also be led into captivity, due to our own sins.

Isaiah cried out that no longer were people to wander aimlessly on windy roads of destruction being influenced by this philosophy or ideology today and different ones tomorrow, but they were to,

"make straight in the wilderness a highway for our God."

Isaiah calls people to not be influenced by the ways and whims of the world but instead walk according to God's law, on a straight path, the highway upon which God has always declared Himself to all people.

Through his unwavering heralding of the true nature of God, Isaiah ensured that,

"Every valley shall be raised up,  
every mountain and hill made low;  
the rough ground shall become level,  
and the rugged places a plain."

He declared there will be no obstacles in the way to proclaiming the name and nature of God, and the sole purpose for him becoming such a herald was so,  
“... the glory of the LORD will be revealed,  
and all Mankind together will see it.  
For the mouth of the LORD has spoken.”

Isaiah's cry was a revelation of God's glory, a glory that was revealed to all Mankind.  
Isaiah was compelled to cry out, but it didn't come naturally to him (that's good to know, isn't it?).  
“What shall I cry?”

In response to this question, he reminded his people, and us, of just how fragile our existence is and that the only thing that truly lasts, and therefore can be relied upon, is the word of God.  
“The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of our God stands forever.”

After reminding his people, and us, to know and accept our own fragility, God roused Isaiah to,

“Go up on a high mountain ...”

And to,

“lift up your voice with a shout; lift it up, do not be afraid; say to the towns of Judah, “Here is your God!”

And who is this God we are meant to behold?

He is the one who “comes with power” and whose “arm rules for him;”. “his reward is with him,” and “his recompense (reward) accompanies him,”. He “tends his flock like a shepherd: He gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart; ...”.

How does Isaiah's cry in the wilderness relate to us today?

What road is Australia, as a nation and as a people, travelling on?

Is there a sense in which the words of Barry McGuire's 1965 song “Eve of Destruction” reflect the attitude of most people in our society?

“And you tell me

Over and over and over and over again, my friend

You don't believe we're on the eve of destruction ...”

Australian society, in general, lives a life of ignorant bliss, believing there is nothing wrong with the way it's living and the choices it's making and that “She'll be right mate!” attitude pervades every aspect of life.

Like Isaiah, we are also called by God to proclaim that if we don't turn from the way we are going and return to Him upon the smooth highway He has constructed for us, by removing all the obstacles that inhibit us from returning to Him as His people, then we are also doomed to a captivity.

It may not be a literal captivity, like the people of Isaiah's time, but plenty of people are in captivity to their guilt, their shame and that underlying, niggling feeling in their conscience that they aren't living life as it ought to be lived.

We also need to proclaim comfort and reassurance that all our sins have been paid for and that the guilt and shame associated with those sins have all been removed and that there is no obstacle that can inhibit people from truly knowing God as their Heavenly Father.

John the Baptist also came to his people with a word of judgment and comfort. He came to his people in the guise of the prophets, like Isaiah, wearing clothing made of camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist and eating locusts and wild honey.

His message to the people of his time was that they needed to be baptised for the forgiveness of their sins and this message struck a note of authenticity with them. They knew that what John the Baptist was calling them to do was what they needed to do.

The people had lived for too long without a voice calling to them in the wilderness, telling them where they were going wrong and what steps they needed to take to have their valleys raised up and their mountains and hills made low, all their rough ground level and their rugged places a plain so they could live in uninhibited fellowship with God.

The people literally turned their backs on the designated way for them to confess their sins, through bringing sacrifices to the temple, and instead brought themselves out to the Jordan river with a desire to become living sacrifices for God. John the Baptist knew though, that his calling out in the wilderness to the people of his time, was just a preparatory calling, and that someone far greater than he would follow in his sandal steps and that even he wasn't worthy enough to stoop down and untie the thongs on the sandals of that person.

John the Baptist was called to prepare the people through a baptism of water to receive a far more powerful and enduring baptism, a baptism with the Holy Spirit.

What did John the Baptist's calling in the wilderness teach us?

The call to repentance, while being counter-cultural, is still necessary. People are burdened with the guilt and shame that living sinful lives brings and they need to be provided with the only remedy that removes that guilt and shame forever, which is repentance.

This needs to be a daily call, for there isn't a day where we, and the people we live and associate with, don't need to bring ourselves before God and ask for forgiveness, is there?

Our call to repentance needs to point to the One who heard our cry to be relieved of the burden of guilt and shame, and revealed Himself as the One who bore the penalty for all sin so that people no longer need to carry that burden of guilt and shame. Our call must point to Jesus. We must call others to share in the fellowship we have with Jesus. He empowers us to live our lives with the strength of the Holy Spirit rather than trying to live in the strength of our own spirit. The Holy Spirit calls us to live our lives for others rather than for ourselves, for a life lived for others is a life that has no time to sin for it is filled with a desire to only ever do good for others.

Finally, what does Peter's message to the people of his time teach us about what we need to cry out to the people of our time?

Peter reminds us that,

"With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years like a day."

Is it just me, or do you feel like time is quickening up?

I know that's not so, every day is 24 hours long, but the older I get the more I realise that a year in my life is nothing. It's just 365 days with the odd extra day thrown in for good measure.

This reality sadly often only comes home to us when we are made to take stock of our time and what we have done and are doing with it. Police Commissioner Grant Stevens and his wife just recently lost their 18-year-old son to a tragic accident. One day he was heading off to spend time with his friends after successfully completing his final year exams and the next he was no longer alive, struck down by someone in their car. We can only imagine what assessment they have made, and continue to make, of their fleeting time with their son but it's a tragic example of just how important it is to be ready, not just for the end of our own lives, but in many ways, more importantly for the end of the lives of others in our families and those around us.

Sadly, this is something we often do not cry out to people until it is too late, and we will all be held accountable for that on the final day.

Peter reminds the people of his time, and us, how the Lord perceives time because many of them had become complacent about their own lives and the urgency to tell people that they need to repent and re-establish their relationship with God. The reason for their complacency was that the time, as we perceive it, between Jesus leaving this world to reign in heaven with His Father and His promised return had been such a long time. Is it any wonder that such a sense of complacency is paramount in our society today after an even longer time between His leaving and promised return?

Time, from our perspective, is something that Jesus graciously uses to our advantage, not His. He uses His supposed delayed return to call us to repent. Each day that we and the people we know don't live according to God's will is a day in which we can all hear His cry to come to Him for forgiveness and cleansing and a chance to re-establish our relationship with Him and our Heavenly Father.

Peter sternly reminds us that the gracious delayed return of Jesus shouldn't be used as a reason to put off returning to a right relationship with Him and His Father for none of us know when that gracious delayed return will end and that "day of the Lord will come like a thief", unexpectedly and suddenly.

On that day everything we know and perceive in this world will disappear in an instant. Nothing we think of as reality will remain, so it's imperative that not only are we ready for that day but that we are constantly calling other people to be ready for that day.

Peter reminds us that the best way we can call people to be ready for that day is by how we live. We "ought to live holy and godly lives" and "look forward to the day of God and speed its coming" or as John writes in Revelation 22:17, "The Spirit and the bride say, "Come!" And let him who hears say, "Come!""

The reason for our eager return of Jesus is the sure hope we have of living with Him forever in "a new heaven and a new earth, the home of righteousness."

This is a hope we need to proclaim in our cry for so many people are living with their hopes dashed and the broken promises of many ringing in their ears. They need to know a true and abiding sure hope in a relationship with Jesus and His Father and the only way they can obtain this sure hope is if we show them where to find it through our actions and our words.

Peter's final warning is to "make every effort to be found spotless, blameless and at peace with (Jesus)". Such a call wasn't just for the benefit of the people in Peter's time, or us, but for the benefit of those who know they are anything

but spotless, blameless, and at peace with Jesus. The only way people can live spotless and blameless lives and find peace isn't by associating with us, but by living in a deep and abiding relationship "with Jesus", and people can live with Jesus amongst people who know their spotted and blame-filled lives are covered by His spotless and blameless life, for He promises that "where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them" (Matthew 18:20). He is with us in our worship, in His word and in His holy communion so let us never take that for granted for all these things proclaim who Jesus is, *not* who we are.

Advent is a time of reflection and preparation for celebrating both the birth and expectant return of our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ, and that reflection and preparation shouldn't just be internal but also external through our proclamation of the living hope we have in our relationship with our Heavenly Father in and through the presence of His Son and guided and empowered by the Holy Spirit.

Let us be encouraged by Isaiah's boldness to proclaim both judgment and comfort to people, yes, even the people of God, so we will all know that while God has righteously judged all our sin, He has also graciously blessed us and called us back to Himself.

Let us proclaim that all our sin has been paid for and we have received from the LORD's hand double for all our sins through the precious sacrifice of Jesus upon that cross at Calvary.

Let us all be called back to the straight highway of God's law, so we are no longer swayed by the philosophies and ideologies of the world, but instead guided by the law that is written on our hearts and brought to our minds by the guidance of the Spirit.

May our words and actions raise up every valley, lower every mountain and hill, level out any rough ground and make plain the rugged places in all our lives so nothing will inhibit us from knowing and having an abiding fellowship with each other and with our God.

This will ensure that the glory of the LORD will be revealed, and that all Mankind together will see it. For the mouth of the LORD will have spoken through our humble words and actions.

Let us proclaim the need for repentance in the waters of baptism through which we receive the enduring baptism of the Holy Spirit and become living sacrifices for our God.

And let us always be proclaiming that our time is of the essence and that Jesus will surely return to bless those who have used their lives and talents to glorify His name and thereby glorify His Father, but anyone not found to be spotless, blameless, and at peace *with Jesus* will face an eternal judgment.

As Christians we need to live our lives in eager anticipation for Jesus' return for when we do this, we will be like lights to those who live in darkness and like salt to those who are wounded by this world, shining a way to peace with God and an eternal healing and cleansing that He freely gives to all who love and put their faith in Jesus.

"I will proclaim the name of the LORD, Oh, praise the greatness of our God!" (Deuteronomy 32:3).

Amen.